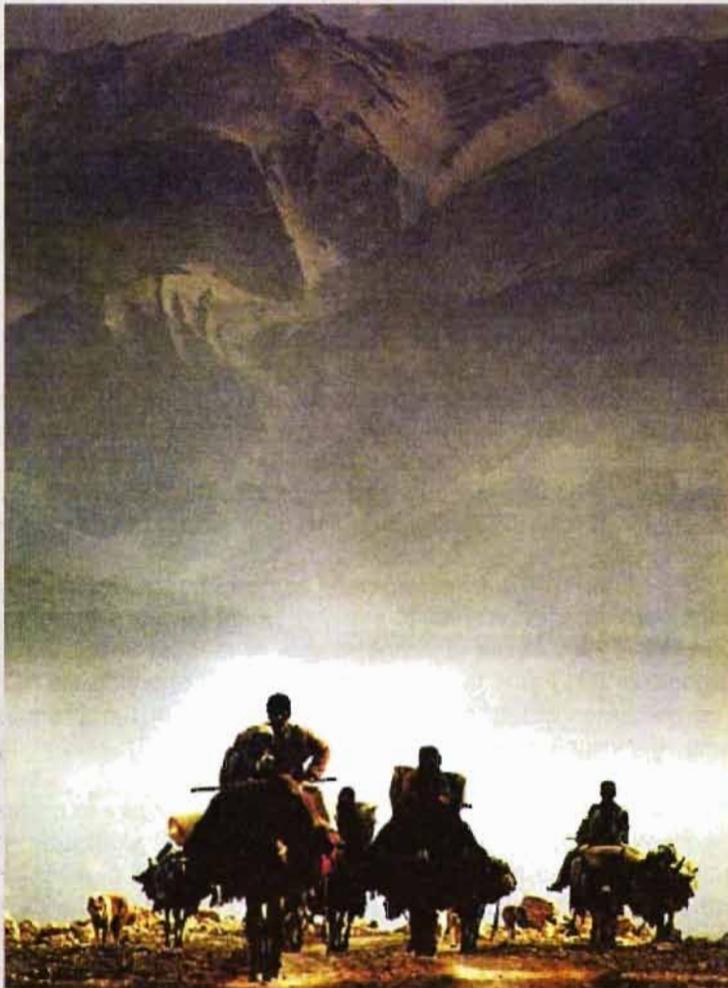


# **Pastoralists, Government, and Natural Resources in Iran: Organisational Learning in the Forest and Range Organisation**

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## Introduction

The geo-climatic characteristics of Iran make most of the country more suitable for pastoralism than for crop cultivation, particularly in the Zagros and Alborz mountains of the central plateau. History illustrates that 'pastoralist nomads' have been the main users of these resources since times probably preceding any settlement by sedentary peoples.

The ability to sustain such a way of life over millennia suggests that, at least until relatively recently, the nomadic pastoralists of Iran were able to achieve some sort of 'balance' between ecology and economy through long-time co-adaptation with their environments. All of this has certainly changed over recent decades, with nomads now being held responsible for very significant degradation of the rangelands over which they migrate with their livestock. Indeed, the situation has degenerated to such an extent that the very nomadic lifestyle and continued existence of these transient pastoralists is considered by many to be under severe threat.

A number of very significant dilemmas characterise the situation.

1. Nomadism is often viewed as responsible for degradation of the natural resource base, with particular respect to very extensive areas of soils eroded through over-grazing. Yet, roughly one third of the total area of Iran (164 million hectares) is unusable for any purpose other than pastoralism. If the nomadic way of production ceases, it is difficult to conceive of other economically productive uses for this land.
2. The utilisation of rangelands by nomadic pastoralists is characterised by low levels of productivity. Yet, although they represent only a small proportion of the population, even in rural areas, nomads are the main breeders of indigenous species of livestock in Iran, providing breeding stock for the rest of the livestock industry in the country, including large-scale commercial livestock enterprises.
3. Poverty and low levels of social welfare among nomadic peoples are causes for significant concern to government agencies committed to matters of equity and social justice. Yet, while a large proportion of the nomadic population now wishes to improve their own welfare through settlement, the government does not enthusiastically support such a strategy for a number of reasons, including those above.
4. There is increasing national concern about the deterioration of the diverse cultural identity and heritage of nomads. Yet, with their capacity for independent action, there are concerns that nomads pose potential problems of control for the government.

Conventional strategies for development have generally failed to identify, or at least to respect, the complex inter-relationships that exist between all of these different factors. It is not surprising, therefore, that the strategies adopted over recent years are not now considered to have been the most appropriate. These have included attempts to achieve the following:

- political control through military intervention and enforced settlement,
- protection of natural resources and improvement of production through natural resource redistribution and 'transfer of technology' models, and
- modernisation of social features through introduction of social services associated with sedentarised communities. Active nomadic support for government-initiated activities has been limited, while the rate of unorganised settlement continues to increase.

Natural resource degradation seems to be the most important and growing concern, and it has not been addressed by resource redistribution, technology, or conservation strategies. The underlying theme of this paper is that the relatively limited achievements in nomadic development and natural resource conservation stem from the fact that policies are:

- based on a reductionist point of view and an analysis that separates theory from practice and neglects the diversity, and complexity of nomadic life; and
- developed on the basis of government perceptions of the nature of the issues confronting nomads, rather than on the basis of concerns expressed by the nomads themselves.

It is argued here that the current approach to development activities must shift from conventional empiricism, with its linear logic and power relationships, to models which endeavour to establish systemic and mutual recognition and accommodation of change among 'clients' with the researcher as facilitator.

## **Process of action research**

There were three phases of inquiry in this study, which when taken together, represent what might be termed a 'system of participatory methodologies'. The aim of the first phase was to explore the complexity and diversity of the current problematic situation. The second phase of research was to assist nomads and various government agencies in understanding each others' perspectives and to go beyond the 'symptom' to find common issues and goals. The third phase of research was designed to facilitate organisational change within the Forest and Rangeland Department. Table 1 summarises these three phases and describes the process in more detail.

### ***Exploration phase: ethnographic research***

The first phase of the research comprised an ethnographic study of the bonkoh as a 'human activity system' (Checkland 1981), a group of people carrying out a certain set of functions pertinent to the research question. In this case, the question involved what the nomads themselves perceived as threats to their welfare and cohesion as a purposeful group of nomadic pastoralists.

The bonkoh was considered an appropriate level for intervention and study for the following two reasons. First, it is territorially identifiable and acts as a 'system' for the purposes of environmental management, both in summer and winter quarters.

**Table 1: Summary of the long-term PAR process used in this research**

**PHASE I. Exploring the situation**

<b>Nomadic Group (23 extended families)</b>	<b>Forest and Rangeland Department</b>	<b>Department for Nomadic Welfare</b>	<b>Livestock Department</b>	<b>Central Government (Department of the Interior)</b>
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**Priority Concerns**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Health</li> <li>• Declining income</li> <li>• Sense of powerlessness to change their situation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overgrazing by livestock</li> <li>• Resulting desertification</li> <li>• Viewed nomads as 'the problem'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poverty alleviation among nomadic communities</li> <li>• Provide mobile services such as health, and education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing production of livestock to meet market demand</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concern with potential independent actions of mobile communities</li> </ul>
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**Situation for Nomads: saw a crisis in their livelihoods because of the following.**

- ⇒ They were crowded into smaller and smaller rangeland areas (large areas lost to agriculture and urbanisation)
- ⇒ High demand for meat thus maintaining large number of animals
- ⇒ Lost spring and fall corridor pastures thus had to quickly truck their livestock between summer and winter pastures, increasing the time spent in those areas which led to overgrazing
- ⇒ With reduced productivity of rangelands, they were making less money from livestock, thus forced into migrant labour
- ⇒ Technical interventions promoted by the Livestock and Forest/Rangeland Departments did not match their perceived needs

**PHASE II. Assisting both nomads and government agencies to understand each others' perspectives, and finding common goals**

**Process**

- ⇒ Presented results from Phase I to various government groups to present perspectives of nomads and competing government agendas
- ⇒ Formed small PAR teams within these groups to discuss issues and make field plans for exploratory studies with new nomadic groups
- ⇒ PAR teams initiate dialogue with nomad groups to improve relations
- ⇒ Form new PAR teams composed of government staff (multiple departments) and nomadic representatives for long-term facilitation

**PHASE III. Facilitating Organisational Change within the Forest and Rangeland Department (on-going)**

**Process**

- ⇒ Formed PAR teams within the Forest and Rangeland Organization
- ⇒ Team members strategically selected so that they had the ability to bring about change (change agents)
- ⇒ Conducted series of workshops within divisions using participatory tools to collectively reflect of past experiences and current issues
- ⇒ Established the Department of People's Participation
- ⇒ Established a research centre in a nomadic area that is run by the communities and facilitated by government staff

Second, it acts for a number of other purposes as a cohesive group, providing a basis for collective action even if the higher level of tribal organisation no longer functions (Emadi et al 1992).

Critical reflections on this phase of the research by the researcher-as-participant/observer confirmed the following: a) the complexity of the current situation as perceived by the nomads themselves; b) the unease of the nomads in their present situation; c) the lack of any sign of improvement in future trends as seen by the nomads; and finally d) an essential need for improvement in the mutual understanding between government officials and nomads. Without changes in the relationships between nomads and agents of the government, there was a strong feeling within the bonkoh that the circumstances were 'not improvable'.

### ***Negotiation phase: assisting nomads and government agencies to understand each others' perspectives***

Reflection on the outcomes of the first phase of the research led to the submission that a more action-oriented or 'development-focused' approach to the research would represent a potentially important innovation in a situation, which currently seemed irresolvable. In other words, the apparent irresolution of the situation in which the nomads believe themselves to be suggested the need for an approach grounded in a context of 'research through action for development'. In turning now to an action-oriented approach to research, the researcher was extremely conscious of the two quite different 'traditions' which characterise it. As Brown (1983, 1993) has proposed, there are profound differences between what he termed the 'northern tradition' of action research (AR) – with its emphasis on organisational change through problem solving – and the 'southern tradition' of participatory action research (PAR) – which has been developed in the context of the 'empowerment of disempowered communities' of the so-called third world. At first glance, each of these two approaches would seem to have relevance in the present context; the 'northern' tradition being perfectly relevant for exploring changes in the organisation of government agencies to more closely fit the self-espoused needs of the nomads, and the 'southern' tradition being highly appropriate to nomadic communities in their search for greater empowerment and for their participation in planning and decision-making processes.

Therefore, the researcher chose an approach which combined both types, by adopting a more or less conventional AR approach to work with agents from relevant government departments, who in turn would be encouraged to practice a PAR approach to the end of encouraging much greater participation by nomads in the quest for 'improvements in their situations'. Thus, action research teams were formed, comprised of local officers from the different government departments concerned with nomadic issues, including the Forest and Range Organization (FRO), the Organisation for Nomadic People (ONPI), under the Ministry of Jihad-e Sazandegi, and the Budget and Planning Organization (BPO), as well as the researcher as facilitator. The team was faced directly with the problematical situation perceived by a range of stakeholders, including representatives of nomadic communities. The first task of the action research team was to understand the general situation of the nomads in terms of various issues. We explored the nomads' views about their situation, main concerns, interests, and issues. We then identified their ideas and views about government services and their relevance to nomads'

needs and issues. Finally, we jointly explored with the nomads possibilities for improvement in the provision of these services.

Previously, the officers had had an abstract perception of the situation. Through collective viewing of the situation and discussions, they were able to see the impact of the projects of their various agencies upon the projects of other agencies. They began to see that the projects interconnected in ways which had not previously been recognised or considered.

An example is relevant here. When a small water reservoir is built by ONPI, the herds of nomads will congregate in that particular area, which causes overgrazing. This problem of overgrazing is the responsibility of FRO. In addition, ONPI has built a road into the area, which means that the nomads can now transport their water by vehicle and thus do not need the reservoir in this particular area. They need the reservoir in an area not accessible by road.

Collective reflection on and explanation of the social context based on direct observations by the officers led to an environment in which all participants were able to look at the situation from the perspective of other organisations. They became familiar with the wide range of activities and projects being implemented at the regional level and were able to examine their previous and current strategies and policies toward the nomads. The situations they observed highlighted interconnections in the social context.

When the officers had conceptualised their findings, theoretical input and discussion was introduced to inform their findings and practice. Relevant theories were introduced as aids in expressing their findings, which they were not able to express in conventional scientific language and logic.

At this time, some nomads were invited to share their views and perspectives on various projects with the government officers. This was an attempt to introduce the nomads' views and perspectives on the situation and to include their perspectives in the ensuing discussions.

Confronting the participants on different occasions with nomads and their capabilities assisted the process of understanding in depth the theory of participation. When the nomads' language and logic was interpreted and contextualised by the facilitator, the participants became more familiar with the idea of the nomads' indigenous knowledge and its importance in the process of decision making for change and development. It became clear during these meetings between government officials and nomads that the nomads were able to see and understand outcomes of various projects while they were in the planning stages.

In brief, the dynamic of this continuous process was that, first, the officials had a regular meeting with all camps of the Ghareghani clan. Second, we had a regular group discussion among the officials, based on the daily visits and observations, in order to keep the process of action and reflection in line with a participatory approach. Before I begin the discussion of this process, I will briefly describe the organisation of the Ghareghani clan.

The Ghareghani bonkoh, the largest remaining part of the Ghareghani sub-tribe and part of the Dare-Shori tribe, is part of the Qashqai tribal confederation. The Qashqai consists of five 'taifeh' (tribes), which each consist of several 'tireh' (sub-tribes), which in turn consist of a number of bonkoh. Each bonkoh consists of several 'urdo' (camps), which stay in particular summer and winter regions and consist of one or more 'siyah-chador' (tents or families); thus, the household is the smallest unit of tribal organisation. A group of households with common kinship is called a 'beyleh'; like most clans, the Ghareghani bonkoh consists of several beyleh with differing origins and histories. The largest beyleh in the Ghareghani clan is Taleb-lu and considers itself Turkish. Thus, the Ghareghani are Turkic-speaking but use a dialect significantly different from urban Turkish; most tribesmen also speak Persian and Luri. The primary neighbours of the Ghareghani in both winter and summer camps are other Qashqai tribes (Emadi 1995).

The process of the regular meetings and discussions held with the Ghareghani can be summarised in the three following points:

- equalising the context and facilitating interaction for effective communication between team members and nomads;
- facilitating a learning environment in which all participants were informed and could consider other perspectives that were presented;
- exploring the possibilities and facilitating the processes for situation improvement.

Regular group discussions among team members were conducted as a means of collective reflection on daily personal observations and organisational perspectives of each member. My role as facilitator was to establish an environment for negotiation between participants, and at the same time create an opportunity for all of us to see the situation in a different way, in a broader and longer-term framework considering different viewpoints.

Creating and maintaining a learning environment among all members was the most crucial task. Appreciation and respect for the personal, professional, and organisational perspectives of others, and more importantly, keeping in mind the nomads and their perspectives in discussions of daily observations and activities, were major elements in the process of learning.

The action phase of the research included 'actions to broaden the perceptions of the government agents' as well as 'actions to practice novel participative research approaches to development'. Reviewing past experiences of various organisations' projects, and focusing on the actual outcomes in the light of the social realities, was a way of learning, which on several occasions transformed the attitudes of the officers toward current approaches to development. Taking a wider perspective, rather than a purely organisational one, and focusing on a bonkoh (clan) enabled them to see the effects of various organisational strategies and their inappropriateness within the social context and nomads' needs. Hence, they gained insight into the nomads' problematical world created by the very policies and actions that were generated based on their own perspectives.

During each session, we reviewed the whole process from the meta-level to see 'what we learned' and 'how we learned' (Bawden 1990). The concepts of social practice and research (action research), experiential learning, and systems thinking were very

unfamiliar activities to all participants at the early stages of this research. On many occasions, they were very uneasy with the situation resulting from this way of thinking and viewing matters. Continued practice and observations on its outcomes made this process more understandable and comfortable. What came as a surprise for most involved was discovering unique possibilities for improving the situation for all members of Ghareghani and the action research team, without any fundamental investment or transfer of technology.

Among the outcomes of this second phase of the research were clear agreement within the action research teams regarding the failure of their conventional approaches to the 'problems with the nomads', and the particular transformation of that worldview into one more accurately portrayed as the 'problems being faced by the nomads'. (The above-mentioned failure included the perceived failure to achieve any sense of shared meaning between nomads and government agents.) There was also the crucial outcome of new action-research development practices by the agents, and the appreciation of this innovation by the nomads.

### ***Organisational learning phase: facilitating change within government agencies***

Reflection on the outcomes of the second phase of the research showed that changes in the attitudes and beliefs of practitioners to 'see things the other way around' are crucial. To start and maintain this crucial change in the attitudes of practitioners and specialists towards people and resources required new strategies for institutional change and action research in organisations, such as 'learning to learn', and 'learning to help in participative ways'. The above-mentioned reasons, as well as the need for up-scaling the outcomes of the research, led us to offer an intensive workshop for FRO officers. The learning process, and the learning strategies behind this phase of research, can be summarised as follows:

- creating a critical learning environment;
- collective reflection on past experiences and current problems;
- assisting the participants to see their views toward the problematical situation from a meta-level;
- introducing systems thinking as a new way of looking at the situation;
- supporting participants in creating a new strategic plan for future action;
- reviewing and evaluating the whole process as a new way of monitoring, planning, researching, and learning.

The programme of the workshop was carefully designed by the facilitators to meet the proposed goals and to follow the theoretical position and the above learning strategies. The major learning themes of the workshop focused on three different areas:

- fundamentals of experiential learning;
- systems thinking; and
- people's participation in natural resource co-management.

The learning process was facilitated through four learning tasks, including:

- group discussions and teamwork;
- propositional inputs, including lectures and learning packages;
- field trips; and
- personal reflection on the process, through preparation of a paper by each participant.

The programme of the workshop was designed for thirteen working days in such a way that the four major learning tasks complemented each other to maintain a continuous process of action and reflection. At the end of each task, and after personal questions and comments by the participants, a group discussion was conducted to facilitate group reflection on the content and process of the workshop.

The essential metaphor introduced during this event was that of the organisation as a learning system as distinct from a regulating system. What we were facing in the process of the workshop was a combination of various barriers among some participants, particularly the perceptual barrier about local people and their role in natural resource destruction. But we were witness to a shift among the majority of participants in their way of looking at the situation. The shift was particularly obvious among technology-oriented practitioners towards recognising the impact of social issues on ecology. Due to the tremendous diversity of personal, professional, and organisational backgrounds of participants, there were significant clashes among them about ways of looking at and conceptualising the experience and collected data. What made these contrasts fruitful to all participants was the applied methodology, which considered this diversity of viewpoints as a source of building rich scenarios, and also led to sharing different perceptions of the issues. Considering the same reality from different angles and perspectives helped all participants move from their strict discipline towards a multidisciplinary perspective, and even beyond that to an interdisciplinary approach to analysing the situation. According to the evaluations of the workshop, these interactions proved to be the most valuable aspect of the workshop, while the inputs and lectures of invited academics and researchers were found to be irrelevant to their current complex and changing situation.

Feedback from the participants in this workshop confirmed the fact that there were significant transformations in ways of thinking about the complex relationships between nomads in Iran, the environments in which they live and work, the technologies that they use as pastoralists, the agents of government departments concerned with these aspects of sustainable development, and Iranian society as a whole. The outcomes of this phase showed that there is an ongoing need to review how we go about our 'seeing' and our 'doing', if we are to improve on current, apparently intractable, complex situations (Bawden 1990).

## Conclusions

To bring about a transformation in organisational performance requires a commitment to a long term process of institutional learning and flexibility in approaches. The three phases of this action research process were organised differently, with different actors involved at each step making up different PAR teams; as issues changed, so did the approach. The PAR process also allowed actors to go beyond differing perspectives and find common goals. They went beyond the 'symptom', e.g. overgrazing, to treat the cause, restricted mobility, by improving mobile services, and by testing innovations directly with the community. The PAR process also improves government coordination. Often government policies oppose one another due to competing mandates of organisations. By working as teams across departments and with communities, these departments are slowly integrating and becoming more needs based.

The overall outcomes of this process include:

- improved understanding of nomadic perspectives by government staff;
- improved relations between nomads and some government staff;
- more successful project implementation in nomadic areas;
- reorganised extension to address nomadic service issues in an inter-disciplinary manner (the Department of People's Participation established);
- improved delivery of mobile services to nomads by Department of Forest and Rangelands;
- contribution to knowledge about nomadism in modern day Iran, thus increased cultural understanding among the wider urban public.

What made this process successful was primarily the presence of a dedicated facilitator who committed to the long-term process and was in a position of power within the Ministry of Agriculture. The author also received the support and cooperation of government departments (primarily the Forest and Rangeland Organization). And fundamental to it all was the adoption of the value 'working for the people, with the people, and by the people'.

However, there are a number of continuing challenges. The issue of upper level policy support is ever present, along with issues of inter-departmental cooperation and competition. Regardless, the initiation of this process and its success to date will continue to ripple through the Ministry and to their 'clients'.

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